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by the Honorable
George F. Kennan

SG

TOTALITARIANISM IN THE MODERN WORLD

We have come together to discuss a phenomenon of our time that has brought the deepest possible misery to untold millions of our contemporaries, even to the point of rendering life itself a hated burden to them. As a source of sorrow and suffering to the human race, I suppose this phenomenon has overshadowed every other source of human woe in our time; for it has demeaned humanity in its own sight, attacked man's confidence in himself, made him realize that he can be his own most terrible and dangerous enemy, more bestial than the beasts, more cruel than nature. And although we Americans have not been directly affected by it, to many of our countrymen it has come to appear as the greatest of all our American problems -- to some of them, I fear, as the only one.

The phenomenon of which I am speaking is, of course, modern totalitarianism; and if we have come together here this week to study and discuss it, it is because we wonder how such a thing could have come into our world, what are the prospects for its passing in the areas where it is now dominant, and what we can do to keep it from spreading and completing the ruin of our environment and our society.

I would like to say at the outset I find this subject a difficult one to discuss in any general way. It is one in which I have no theoretical erudition. My experience with it has been largely pragmatical. It began against an educational background which I recognize today to have been wholly inadequate, and it has proceeded in ways that failed to correct that deficiency.

I first came into close contact with totalitarianism when I served in the Baltic countries -- Estonia and Latvia -- in the late twenties and early thirties. Those countries were of course not themselves totalitarian at that time; but both had only recently been through periods of Bolshevik rule. The traces were still fresh; and the shadow of the neighboring communist power still lay heavily across the lives of their peoples. I was repelled from the start by certain features of Russian communism apparent even in the shadow: notably, its reckless injustice, its shocking physical cruelty, and its congenital untruthfulness. This repulsion was so great that I never could take very seriously the theory that lay behind it -- the

theoretical pretensions of communism seemed, when you saw them at that time from the vantage points of Reval and Riga, so obviously hypocritical. In this way I missed the period of preoccupation with the theoretical aspects of communism that so many other people passed through who were interested in the Soviet Union. That had both advantages and disadvantages; but among the latter was the fact that it left unfilled an existing educational gap.

Later it fell to me to reside and serve for long periods of time in both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Again, duties were practical, and experience related largely to minor problems of our relations. Never, as it seems to me in retrospect, did we foreign service officers have occasion to systematize what we knew about the regimes of those countries, to attempt the general assessment of that sort of power from the standpoint of its place in history and its relation to our civilization as a whole. We were always too busy dealing with individual manifestations of it that posed immediate and specific problems for our government.

When, therefore, I look into my own mind today to see what there might be in there in the way of general appreciations about the nature of totalitarianism, I find a great disorder of undigested impressions and a number of actual blanks where I know that knowledge and deduction ought to be present and aren't. And that being so, I don't think that I can hope to add anything valuable in the way of historical or theoretical appreciation to the fund of analysis that we already have before us — much of it from the minds and pens of people far more learned than myself — many of them actually with us in this hall tonight. The only thing I can do, as it seems to me, is to expose to you, in all humility, the state of such progress as I have been able to make and not to make in my own thinking on this subject to date and the nature of the questionings with which that progress has left me — for I am bound to say that I have far more questions on this point than I have conclusions. What I am afraid you must expect, therefore, is merely something in the way of a personal confession; and I can only hope that the rather unusual experience from which it flows will give it a significance that it would not otherwise have.

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When I begin to think of totalitarianism as a general phenomenon, the first thing that assails me is, as usual, the problem of definition. That there is such a thing, I have no doubt; but how does one delimit the term in such a way as to make it a useful one for purposes of group discussion? We have all noted totalitarian elements and tendencies in every human society, including sometimes our own; but to me the only

places where these tendencies have really flowered and revealed their true nature seem to have been Germany and the Soviet Union. Some people would argue about this, I know. They would suggest that other countries as well should be included under this heading. Let us leave this argument aside for the moment, and agree that there are at least no better examples than Germany and Russia, and that these might then be permitted to serve as a basis for discussion.

But even here I run at once into difficulties; for I see that the Russian and German phenomenon were highly disparate things, in nature as in origin; and I am moved to wonder whether there is any generic phenomenon that we can identify and describe from actual experience as totalitarianism. Is there really some identity of essence as between Russian communism and German National Socialism? Or is it simply that two countries have both had certain national experiences in our time and that those experiences have simply had points in common, perhaps accidentally?

When I try to picture totalitarianism to myself as a general phenomenon, what comes into my mind most prominently is neither the Soviet picture nor the Nazi picture as I have known them in the flesh, but rather the fictional and symbolic images created by such people as Orwell or Kafka or Koestler or the early Soviet satirists. The purest expression of the phenomenon, in other words, seems to me to have been rendered not in its physical reality but in its power as a dream, or a nightmare. Not that it lacks the physical reality, or that this reality is lacking in power; but it is precisely in the way it appears to people, in the impact it has on the subconscious, in the state of mind it creates in its victims, that totalitarianism reveals most deeply its meaning and its nature. Here, then, we seem to have a phenomenon of which it can be said that it is both a reality and a bad dream, but that its deepest reality lies strangely enough in its manifestation as a dream, and it is by this manifestation that it can best be known and judged and discussed. This conclusion, involving as it does a most profound contradiction, is already an unsettling and baffling one to the simple bureaucratic mind; and I can only back off from it and pass it on to the philosophers with my best wishes and regards.

Leaving aside, then, the question of definitions, and turning to the nature of whatever it is we conceive to be totalitarianism: there are a number of things that occur to me about it and seem to me to be significant. Whether they constitute an adequate list of its important attributes, I strongly doubt. I cannot say that they build up to any reliable conclusions. They remind me of the observation (I forget the origin) -- that "We have chaos, but not enough to make a world." Anyway, let me list some of them for you and tell you what I think they may mean.

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First of all, I have been greatly impressed with the primary importance, in the totalitarian picture, of modern police weapons and their use. I am thinking here not merely of arms and munitions; I am also thinking of such things as modern means of transportation and communication. Whenever, today, a group of men obtains a monopolistic control over these things and exercises that control with sufficient ruthlessness and with suitable techniques, for the purpose of perpetuating its own power, and so long as that group retains its internal unity and does not suffer violent interference from outside, popular revolt is simply impossible. In this fact there seems to me to lie the fundamental reality of modern totalitarianism; and I would point out that this is a reality derived from the progress of modern technology.

Whether totalitarianism was conceivable apart from modern technology, I do not know. I have heard it said by well informed people that all the essential features of Soviet communism could be observed in certain ancient oriental despotisms. I cannot be a good judge of this, for I know nothing about oriental history. I would be inclined to doubt that this could be wholly true, precisely because of the importance of the technological component in the totalitarian system as we know it today. In any case, so far as the West is concerned, totalitarianism does seem to have been something made possible only by the technological developments of the past century and a half, which have operated to enhance enormously the potential scope and intensity of absolute power.

Noting that, my mind turns next to the question of popular support -- i.e., the relation of totalitarian power to the feelings of people. Here I notice that there have been great differences between the Nazi and Soviet phenomena. In Germany, Nazi rule certainly enjoyed at most times a fairly high degree of mass support -- although whether this would have continued much longer, had Nazi power not been destroyed when it was, seems to me to be doubtful. In the Soviet Union, communism was introduced by a small minority and has been maintained the same way. The Soviet regime enjoyed the passive tolerance of the masses at the time of the seizure of power, largely because of the lack of promising alternatives, and in consequence of certain demagogic concessions it made to popular feeling at the moment; but it has never been the product or the object of mass enthusiasm. No majority was ever necessary to Bolshevism. People in this country have a seemingly incurable tendency to overrate the propaganda successes of Bolshevism. I am not aware that anywhere in the world, unless you insist on including China in this picture, has Soviet communism ever won over a majority or commanded mass support; in no case, certainly, has propaganda been the main source of the establishment or maintenance of its power; in no

place has it ever come into power except by force of arms — by pressure, that is, exerted either by the direct application or by the threat of armed force.

This being the case, a great deal that has been written about totalitarianism on the basis of experience with National Socialism has turned out to be not fully applicable to Soviet communism. This is true, it seems to me, of a good part of the teaching concerning the importance of the cultivation of mass delusions, and the creation of scapegoat elements on which to focus mass emotion. These things always have been present in totalitarianism in one degree or another; they have been really important, on occasions, to the seizure of power; but they are important to the maintenance of power only if a serious attempt be made to maintain real mass enthusiasm. The Soviet rulers make no such attempt. They do, of course, in a rather half-hearted and routine way, employ both devices: the myth and the scapegoat. Now, for example, two decades after the final and official liquidation of the "remnants of capitalism" in Soviet society, lacking any other plausible scapegoat element, the Soviet rulers are not averse to gleaning such meagre profit as can be gleaned from the exploitation of the endemic, and not really very powerful, anti-semitism in certain sections of the Soviet population. But they do this only when it coincides with considerations of foreign policy. And as a domestic measure, they do not exaggerate its importance. Their rule actually rests not on the cultivation of illusions but on a bitter reality: which is the existence of a monopoly of physical force and a readiness to employ that monopoly quite ruthlessly in the interests of the perpetuation of the power of the ruling group. The mystique and semi-religious appeal are important for the promotion of Soviet purposes in areas where Soviet power is not yet dominant; where it already reigns supreme, they become subsidiary elements.

It is true that the effective application of Soviet police power involves the use of certain devices peculiar, as far as I know, to modern totalitarianism, namely, the maintenance of a system of artificial tensions within society (as a substitute for the natural ones, which might be dangerous to the system) and the employment of coercion on a vast scale for what might be called prophylactic purposes (that is, the concentration camp system) in place of or in addition to its use on a small scale for the punishment of actual offenses, as in bourgeois democracy. It involves, in other words, as you all know, the punishment of people primarily for the crimes they have not committed, rather than for those they have — the punishment of those who might rebel, rather than those who do. It even involves, precisely for this reason, a species of intimacy and collaboration with the real criminal element in society, since the latter are necessary to

provide certain of the essential features of the earthly purgatory: the trusties and the yegg-men, the tormentors of the political prisoner and exiles. These — not, as many people suppose, the degree of terror — are the features of modern totalitarianism, incidentally, that seem to distinguish it from most of the traditional forms of despotism.

But none of these things have anything to do with mass support, really. They are only addenda to the system of police intimidation. This being so, popular emotional support must be viewed as something which may or may not be a feature of totalitarianism, but is certainly not essential to it. What is essential is only the seizure, organization, and ruthless exercise of power. For the seizure of power, a certain degree of mass bewilderment and passivity are required — in other words, certain negative rather than positive states of the mass mind. Once power has been seized, even these states of mind are not vitally important.

Now modern police weapons are of course only one of the essential components of the totalitarian situation. Another is the presence of a body of men — namely, the natural bureaucrats and enthusiasts of a police regime — ready to use those weapons for the purpose indicated. I would like to say that I think such people are always present in any human society, to some degree or another. They are not a product of the political movement itself. They are something that is always there and needs only to be activated. They represent a mutation of the human species. I do not need to describe these people to you, nor is it pleasant to do so. They merge with the born criminal element, to which I have already referred. They are the brutal, aggressive, unsuccessful natures, deficient in moral courage, in self-confidence, in self-respect, in the ability to compete on any even terms. They are the ghouls of human society. In the sunlight of normalcy you do not see them. But let society be overtaken by the darkness of some special weakness, which leaves it helpless and vulnerable, and they are suddenly there, slinking out of the shadows, ready to take over, ready to flog, to intimidate, to torture, to do all those things in the company of armed men, and preferably against unarmed ones, that help to give them the illusion of success and security, that dispel for the moment the nightmare of inadequacy by which they are haunted.

Such people, I reiterate, are always there in every human society. They are all around us. They are the people of whom Dostoyevsky's totalitarian, Verkhovensky, said in "The Possessed": they "are ours, though they do not know it." They are the Judases of whom any political society would be justified in saying: "Behold, the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table." But in most instances, they become real dangers only when the weakness of society is already present.

It is these reflections that bring me to think of modern totalitarianism as a sort of a straightjacket which can conceivably be clamped on to any great modern society if and when circumstances so dispose. To use another word picture: it is a condition made possible by modern police weapons, a state into which any great national entity can relapse, if it doesn't watch its step. Whether it might be considered a natural state for peoples of other climes and eras, I do not know. But for western man, taught as he has been to look for hope and solace in the dignity of the human spirit, it is surely a pathological, abnormal state — a sick state, devoid of hope, characterized by the deepest sort of agony and misery and depression.

It is a state, furthermore, from which there is no recovery, I fear, by the patient's own effort. Only three things can, as far as I can see, operate to bring it to an end. One is successful military intervention by external power. A second is forgetfulness and lack of due vigilance and zeal on the part of the totalitarian rulers themselves. The last is the disruption of the unity of the ruling group. But to the last development, totalitarianism surely has a certain congenital vulnerability in its dependence on the individual dictator and in its lack of any reliable institutional framework for the transfer of power from one individual to another. The lack of such a framework is precisely one of the things that distinguishes it from dynastic absolutism, as indeed also from bourgeois democracy. Just in these days it is useful for us to bear in mind, I think, that the ultimate test of totalitarianism lies not in its ability to surmount peaceably any single crisis of succession but rather in its ability to survive what is bound to be a long series of such crises, each attended by great nervousness and fear and secret intrigue, and sure to open up many possibilities for misunderstanding, division and paralysis of the central will. This long series of crises must always present an even greater danger in the case of a regime that has projected its power on to other national societies and is attempting to hold together a far-flung empire than in the case of the indigenous totalitarian regime alone. This type of power is most safely exerted within the intimacy of the national society, so far as the intrinsic relationships of power are concerned. But on the other hand, totalitarian rulers are always moved to try to eliminate the awkward standard of comparison involved in the existence of freedom elsewhere, particularly in the country just next door. This is their dilemma — the reconciling of the requirements of domestic totalitarianism with the urge to imperialism. It is on the horns of this dilemma, in my view, that they are most likely to be at some stage impaled and destroyed.

This view of the likely impermanence of totalitarian systems (a view which, I must say, is not shared by all of my good friends)

By the same token, we are relatively unreceptive to the understanding of war as a social phenomenon in its own right, quite independent of its military result. This quality, however, has been tremendously important in recent European history, and particularly in the case of World War I. That war strained more than any other the faith and credulity of the men who participated in it. It tended to appear to these men either as a wholly senseless and tragic undertaking or as the product of the criminal manipulations of mysterious and malicious conspiratorial forces. This was particularly true, quite naturally, in the case of the defeated countries; and it is useful to remember that both Germany and Russia, though they were on opposite sides of the war, fell into this category.

Thirdly, there were certain other highly significant similarities in the recent social and political histories of these two countries. Let us work backward from the revolution. In each case, the advent of totalitarianism had been immediately preceded by the overthrow of a monarchy and by a brief and unsuccessful liberal era. In Germany, this embraced the period of the Weimar Republic and in part the final years of the Empire. In Russia, this embraced the brief months of the provisional government, but also, it is important to note, in some measure the years from the revolution of 1905 to the great war.

Back of these abortive liberal experiences there lay, in each case, the relatively late survival of feudal institutions, reaching even into the memory of living man, and, accordingly, a relatively shallow, brief, and imperfect development of bourgeois-democratic institutions.

Next, I would note that in both countries the growth of secular national feeling occurred largely in the Nineteenth Century and was subject to the influences of the romantic concepts of the nation-state evolved by German thinkers in the early part of that century; concepts that glorified the bonds of race and tongue, surrounded these bonds with vague and mystical overtones of emotional association, and tended to disintegrate rather suddenly and contemptuously the old hierarchical break-downs of national and international life. It is significant, I suspect, that liberal thought in both countries tended to associate itself with this new concept of the nation-state, and to be incredulous of the need for the preservation of any continuity with the dying feudal order.

Finally, I note that both of these countries were great military landpowers, characterized long before their respective revolutions by a relatively high degree of centralization and bureaucratization. In the overseas trading nations, the growth of centralized, bureaucratic power had been impeded by various realities, notably by the vital importance of the great urban trading communities, such as London or

Liverpool or Amsterdam, by the influence of business circles generally, and by the complicated compromises always involved in the overseas relationship. Similarly, the outlooks of people in these countries had been kept varied and flexible and cosmopolitan by the constant experience of travel and contact with other environments. In the military land powers there was relatively little to stop the march of centralization, both in administration and in outlook. Both Russia and Germany were relatively receptive, by virtue of their national experience, to the sort of administrative and ideological centralization which totalitarianism involves.

Now these are only fragmentary and impressionistic points. It would be hard, in the space of time allotted to us, to bring them forward in any other way. To me, they prove little; but they do point in a direction. And if I were to be asked to describe that direction, I would do so substantially as follows.

All societies have varying degrees of vulnerability to totalitarian tendencies and of resistance to them.

The powers of resistance are partly connected with, and dependent on, the requisite degree of gradualness in evolution — a decent and sedate pace of social change — a pace that permits change to occur without disrupting the continuity of the generations or destroying the individual's confidence in his environment. Where peoples have had a decent time to prepare themselves for the strains of modern life they are better able to resist the totalitarian virus than where these things have come too suddenly upon them.

Furthermore, variety and decentralization of every sort have increased the powers of resistance. The dispersion of interests and tastes and outlooks through maritime and overseas activities, the experience of far-flung commercial and political empires, the necessity for compromise between competing linguistic groups; these things have kept open the vistas of men, preserved the heterogeneity of their outlook, sustained the need and capacity for compromise and adjustment.

We see, also, how important it is, if men are not to fall into the illness of totalitarianism, that they should not be subjected without adequate ideological preparation to the strains of the great apocalyptic disasters of society; that without such preparation they should not know on their own territories the infinite horrors of modern warfare, that they should not be asked to sit for dreary long years in filthy, vermin-infested trenches and to witness what can only seem to them to be the senseless agony and slaughter of their fellow creatures, just as they must not be thrown out onto the streets

by unemployment through processes they cannot understand, and thus be forced to lose their sense of usefulness and belonging in society. If democracy does not wish its members to turn to the morbid and despairing delusions of totalitarianism, it must take care to spare them these harrowing and excruciating experiences. This does not mean that it must always avoid war, or that it must bury its people in the extreme paternalism of the welfare state. But it must never ask men to undergo such experiences unless it also enables them to understand their rationale. If democracy cannot make men understand why life is sometimes hard and dangerous, it will not be able to continue successfully to subject men to hardship and danger. It will have only itself to blame if by so doing it drives them to seek refuge in the purgatory of totalitarianism. For even a purgatory in which there seems initially to be some semblance of meaning, however crude and irrational, is preferable, from the standpoint of the human soul, to a liberal chaos from which the sense of community is absent and in which freedom means only the sense of being lost and lonely and helpless.

I suspect, furthermore, that a neurotic sense of tidiness in political arrangements can be a great danger to any society. Too great an urge for symmetry and order, too strong an insistence on uniformity and conformity, too little tolerance for the atypical and minority phenomenon: these are all things that can grease the path by which nations slide into totalitarianism. Lucky, in this respect, are countries like Great Britain, with its bizarre pattern of nationalities and dialects, its far-flung bonds of blood and interest, and its picturesque ceremonies and traditions; lucky is Switzerland, with mountain barriers, its unique historical path, and its multilingual balance. Lucky, even, we Americans have been up to this time, with our sectional diversities, our checks and balances, and our deference to the vital interests of competing minorities. Woe to any of us, if these things begin to yield to the levelling influences of the perfectionist, to utopian dreams of progress and equality, to the glorification of conformity in tongue or outlook that have been embraced in the concept of romantic nationalism and have gone before the disasters of totalitarian triumph. Diversity, in all the glorious disorder of nature, is the best defense of healthy societies.

In short, I suspect totalitarianism to be the retribution that befalls all peoples who give free rein to extremists and extremisms, who forget the golden rule of political life, which is that ideas are never good except in moderation, and that anything carried to its logical conclusion becomes a menacing caricature of itself. For this reason one must not be too morbid about incipient totalitarian tendencies, which are only a part of life — so long as they remain incipient and counter-balanced. All totalitarianism is only

a matter of degree; but it is precisely in this fact that its mortal danger lies. Who says differences of degree are not vital differences? Remember Shakespeare's words:

> Take but degree away — untune that string
> And hark what discord follows:
> Then everything includes into power —
> Power into will, will into appetite,
> And appetite, a universal wolf ...
> Must make perforce a universal prey
> And last eat up himself ...

Now I have said many things this evening about totalitarianism, and very few about freedom — which was supposed to be the other side of my topic. I am sure the interconnection of all these things has been apparent to you throughout. But I would like to suggest to you, in conclusion, that these words of Shakespeare are no less important in their relation to liberty than in relation to authority. There is, of course, no such thing as freedom in the abstract. There is only a freedom from something, and a freedom to something. It is therefore not just "freedom," but the kind of freedom that is important as an antidote and an alternative to totalitarianism. And here I would only like to say that it is by no means the maximum absence of restraint that is demanded. On the contrary, I sometimes think that totalitarianism finds it hardest to enter where the framework of individual obligation is firmest, and where certain forms of restraint are most highly developed. Those forms of restraint are of course the voluntarily accepted ones — the ones that deal most gently and considerately with the real needs of men — and not just those needs that lend themselves to idealization, but the absurd needs, the pathetic ones, the anarchic ones. These are the forms of restraint that give recognition to charity and to humor and to sadness — the ones that take man as he is, not as other people would like to make him. They are ones that make it possible for him to arrive at acceptable compromises with himself and his fellows, and to live life without destroying its meaning, or disgracing the Image in which he was created.

Such a system of restraints — in reality, the highest form of freedom — must be sought in the wisdom of the ages, and in the ethical codes that the great religions of civilization have developed. Never, but really never, will it be found in utopian visions and undertakings that set out to change the nature of man and the order of human affairs within our time. If we Americans wish, then, to hold aloft at this time a standard of freedom that will really serve to rally and inspire the forces of resistance to modern totalitarianism, we will have to reject many of our favored

predilections, outstandingly our belief in human perfectibility and the miracle of progress. We will have to see to it that our visions of the human future, unlike those of totalitarianism, are tuned to the deepest needs of man, that they show a certain tenderness to his weaknesses, and a forebearance for all the childishness and helplessness of his nature.